

Implicit Distances

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From Aldo Van Eyck's attention to thresholds¹, Milos Bobic's idea of urban interfaces², to Gordon Matta-Clark's sliced territories³ or Peter Rowe's Middle Landscape⁴, in-between spaces have been an important topic in architectural or urban debates. In many cases, intermediate spaces are presented as *de facto* interesting spaces, as if they automatically guarantee urban qualities, without unveiling the reasons for it. In other discourses, they are approached as blurry intermittent spaces, defined as grey zones (the semi-public, semi-private approach), as unsharp areas, sandwiched in between more important or more easily definable spaces. Apart from the possible qualities in-between spaces may obtain, the main focus should be however on the way these spaces are defined, by seeing them as part of a bigger system of adjacent spaces and programs.

The Streetscape Territories Research Project⁵ tries to explore this subject by analysing or designing a series of urban projects and by trying to explore the ways these projects, and their constituting in-between spaces, relate to the street as part of a depth configuration. This research project studies how these buildings, properties, streets or areas are organised territorially and how they define contemporary streetscapes in multiple ways.

In-between

In "*Territory without a model*" Manuel de Solà-Morales described an alternative approach to the meaning of places, next to the traditional concept of "*genius loci*": he referred to "*the expected sensation of voids and the indifference of its constructions*"⁶. According to the author, the organising principles of contemporary urban fabric, especially the ones defining its periphery, are no more tactics of composition, repetition and differences but "systems of relative distances"⁷. He mentioned that the dialogue between a building and its surrounding became more singular but at the same time obtained a more abstract dimension, as in-between distances belong to an increasingly complex matrix, an urban system of distances that can be understood as a non-absolute configuration, like communicating vessels, where one intervention implies immediate consequences for other parts of that same configuration. de Solà-Morales argued that the distance between areas or autonomous packages defines the way our built environment is constructed or transformed: our daily experiences are increasingly defined by sets of minimal or maximum distances. More important than the property itself became the distance between properties, between properties and natural resources, between properties and infrastructures, between properties and high employment areas. Instead of zoning or defining density, sets of rules of relative distances are configured, that in suburban conditions might be different as in downtown areas. In a way, time and distance is defined and measured systematically within the contemporary landscape, allowing a needed comparison with other spatial configurations.

*"The space in between things, between objects and subjects next to one another, between my house and my neighbour's, between their office and mine, is traversed by many strangers, and it is not a meeting place; it has become empty because it plays no recognisable role; this space is only required to be permeable, and should be traversed with a s little friction as possible"*⁸

Similarly, Bernardo Secchi detected a change in the nature of the built environment: continuity, together with centrality or urban equilibrium, is now obtained by recognising urban fragments and spaces-in-between. He referred to the "*inverse-city*", where the traditional centre occupies periphery and vice versa, where big-scale depth sequences might be turned inside-out.

Peter Rowe agreed and described the very characteristics of contemporary landscape in "The Middle Landscape": *"The most disconcerting physical characteristic of the middle landscape is the desolate and inhospitable space left between many buildings and building complexes. Commercial strips extend out in the surrounding countryside without any suggestion of a centre or of termination. Bland residential subdivisions and office parks leapfrog over one another, leaving vacant land and unfinished developments in their wake. Many buildings have a temporary quality, suggesting that they might be here today and gone tomorrow. The surrounding landscape is pervaded by parking lots that offer little definition of their primary function, let alone an inviting environment. Entirely absent are characteristics of traditional city streets that graciously provide for public life"*⁹

He recognised the appearance of voids and gaps

within the middle landscape as a problematic but characterising element: he missed the continuous overlap-based complex urban set-ups, that “*graciously provided*” real public life. Unlike this fragmented landscape, contemporary lifestyles might be defined by continuous movement patterns, as we leave our house to go to work in the early morning, drop off the kids at school, pass by the nearest gas station to fill up the tank and buy the newspaper, go to work, come back in the evening, pick up some groceries on the way back, before dropping a colleague off at home. In other words, a discontinuous landscape may seem more continuous as a result of overall possibilities of movement, as a smooth succession of activities, all of them related to mobility based on high access. Indeed, this pattern of non-stop movements results in a physically highly fragmented and discontinuous landscape, as Rowe described. Voids or gaps, seen as structural elements within processes of spatial and social specialisation and segregation in this landscape, seem to have gained importance within urban theories during the last decades.

Increasing mobility as a result of the mentioned specialisation and segregation, a growing separation between work and leisure together with an externalisation of domestic tasks, and higher economic, technological, environmental or administrative demands all result in higher social pressure, hence the increasing need to separate or isolate territories. In-between space became one of the main structural elements in the way we build homes, streets, neighbourhoods or regions. How we define these territorial distances however is the major concern.

Explicit versus implicit

An interesting paradox appears in the discourse of delimiting territories in urban fabrics: being part of this abstract, indifferent, generic and matrix-like field of relative distances, an increasing number of urban projects simultaneously obtained a more “figurative” or less abstract dimension. Analysis of recent urban projects, from the domestic scale till the scale of the neighbourhood, indeed shows an increasing explicitness of boundary delimitation and sharper definition of these sets of distances. The more the built environment turns into a not-so-site-specific system of relative distances, the more space is produced in a more explicit way, easier to read, leaving no doubt of how to interpret the very system.



Figure 1: fencing techniques in Toronto, Canada

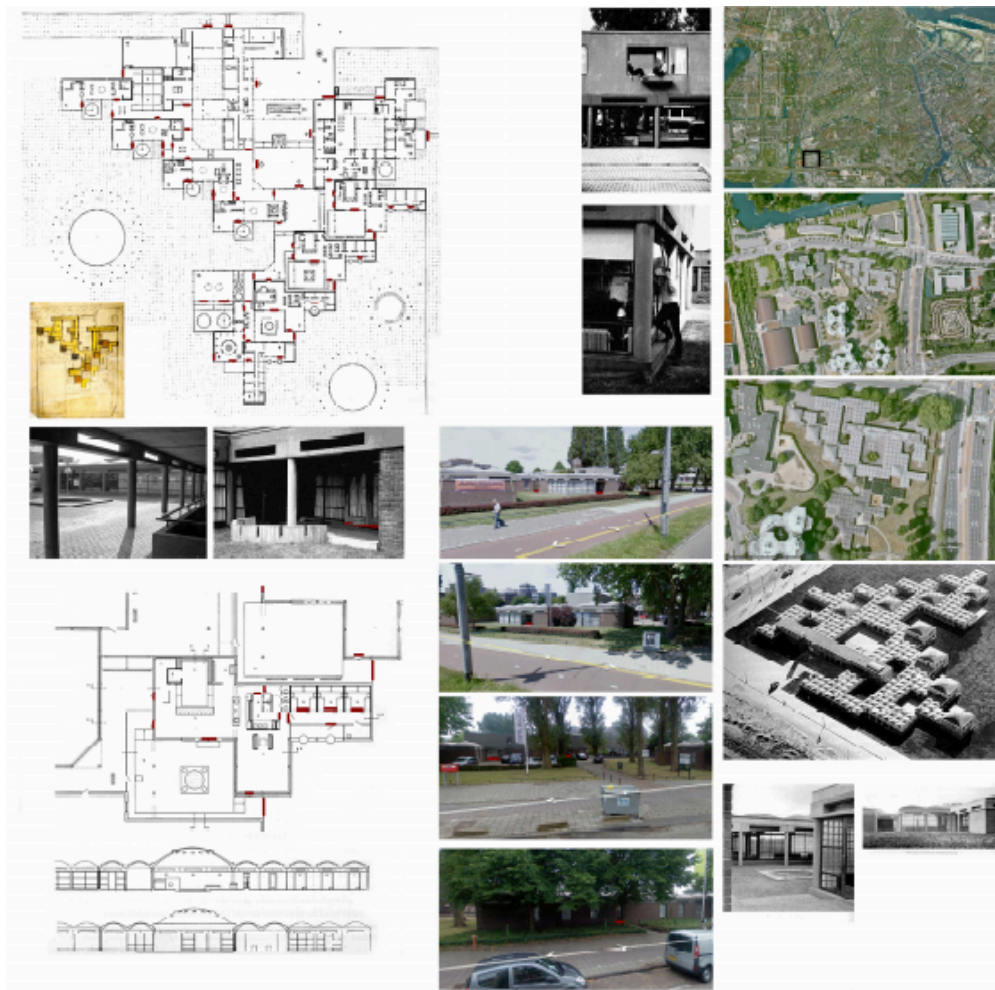
As part of the Streetscape Territories research project, a series of urban projects is analysed, as mentioned before. The results show cases of configured aggregated territories, based on systematic separation by applying deliberate gaps or intervals in the lay-out, as well as projects that rely on spaces that each have rather high integrated values within the depth configuration¹⁰, making use of overlap scenarios. Both implicit as explicit boundary delimitation occurs in these urban projects, even if the last phenomenon seems to be dominating: most of the built projects seem to increasingly apply explicit

boundary delimitation, avoiding a free appropriation by its users and embracing a no-risk policy when referring to privacy or security.

A first case is the Aldo Van Eyck's Orphanage project in Amsterdam, built in between 1955-1960, that tried to balance the presence of a strong collective structure with the more individual cells for its young inhabitants. Here, the territorial configuration depends on sharing space not as a functional or rational priority but as a substantial structural quality of spatial sequences: the collective spaces and its carefully designed thresholds can be seen as the *file rouge* of the project. The architect laid out a configuration of intimacy and collectiveness, carefully designed by a systematic application of threshold scenarios. To begin, the territorial transition from the street till the main entrance area is defined by high physical depth: the entrance door is situated almost in the centre of the complex and in order to get there, one first approaches the building, crossing a set of buffer areas or sequential gaps, to arrive at a pre-entrance meeting place under part of the building parallel to the street where a rather informal meeting area is organised. Once passed this area, one arrives at a central courtyard that gives access to various parts of the collective corridor structure that can lead you to the different sections, organised by the age of the orphans residing. The collective structure has a high integration value on all levels: from the scale of the building and its direct environment, till the organisation of dormitories in each section of the program.

In this case, depth is defined by a high level of physical depth, combined with an even higher level of visual depth as the project shows many long sight lines, criss-crossing areas with a collective as well as an individual use. On the level of publicness and privateness of spaces within the territorial configuration, accessibility distribution shows a coherent and complex diagram that was the starting point of the design process, not considered a detail to solve later in the process. The general depth diagram shows a well orchestrated and controlled territorial transition from the street as a public area till arriving in the most private part of the building. However, sets of sequential gaps and various overlap scenarios within the sequence increase the complexity of the depth configuration. Various territorial gates are introduced to plan the sequence gradually. The detailed depth diagram, from the corridor till the sleeping room, shows a similar pattern: a relatively high proportion of collective spaces, carefully broken down following a regular rhythm and showing multiple access possibilities. Territorial configuration is complex and coherent and adds an important value to the rich architectonic experience of the building.¹¹

It is the very combination of territorial boundaries, spacing mechanisms or sequential gaps, overlap scenarios and a wide range of ways of delimitating territories that defines the depth configuration and stresses the qualitative characteristics of this studied project. In this built cluster complex, besides designing groups of spaces or the simple sharing of facilities, collective spaces have a high integration value and allow infinite possibilities of moving through a building, of appropriating space, of meeting people. This case study illustrates potential qualities of in-between spaces by considering them as part of a broader collective strategy and the non dependence explicit boundary definition of those in-between spaces.



Access Configuration, Territorial Transition, Sequential Gaps and Overlap Scenario ground level.

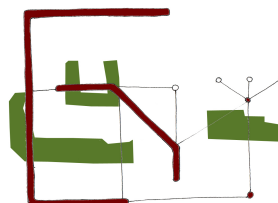
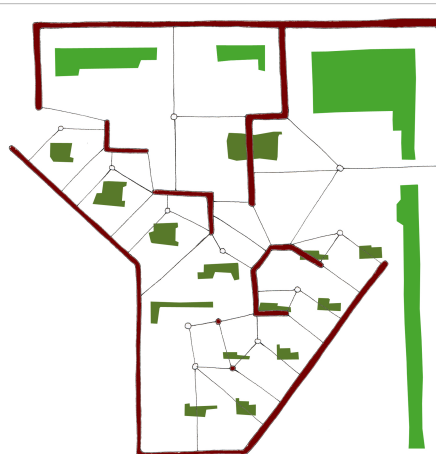
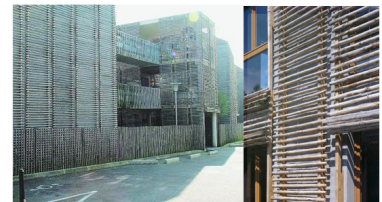
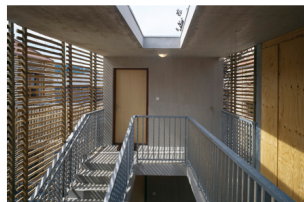
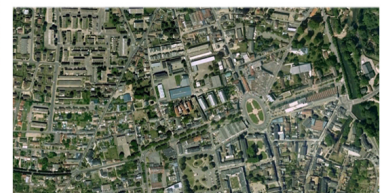
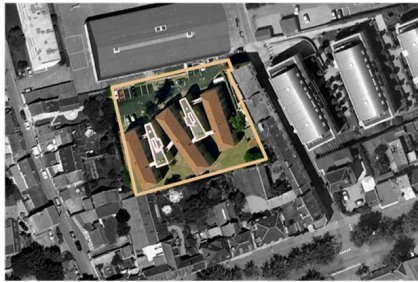


Figure 2: Analysis of the Aldo Van Eyck's Orphanage project in Amsterdam, 1955-1960. (ground floor plan taken from Francis Strauven: "Aldo Van Eyck: Shaping the New Reality form the In-between to the Aesthetics of Number", Study Centre, Mellon Lectures, CCA, 2007)

Another case study, showing a different use of in-between spaces, is a well-published residential project by Eduard François in Louviers, called La Closerai (France, 2005): it is often praised for its flexibility and use of a permeable interface. In this project, the architect however defines a rather non-negotiable way of using space: a clearly hierarchical configuration of territories allows the architect to decide which spaces needed to be separated from each other and which ones could be shared by overlapping the indoor as well as the outdoor spaces. It is important to say that, even if there are overlap scenarios, they are explicitly (pre)defined (see figures) which does not allow an open interpretation by its users as was the case in the Aldo Van Eyck's project. In this project, in-between spaces become spaces to separate instead of to integrate and the architect looked for a non-risk scenario to achieve clarity in the project. The spaces in between the different built volumes seem to be minimum distances needed to provide privacy, setbacks from the neighbour's life. We could say that this project is more about material transparency than about territorial permeability and complexity.

During the end of the twentieth century, this “figurative” way of working became very common in architectural projects, at the scale of the residential cluster, but as well at a slightly bigger scale. The implicit, that is the possibility to read and use space in a more open or suggestive way, is increasingly avoided, at all scales: systematic use of the aggregation model at the scale of the property leads toward a similar result at the scale of a region: explicitly defined boundaries constitute a generic system of relative distances.



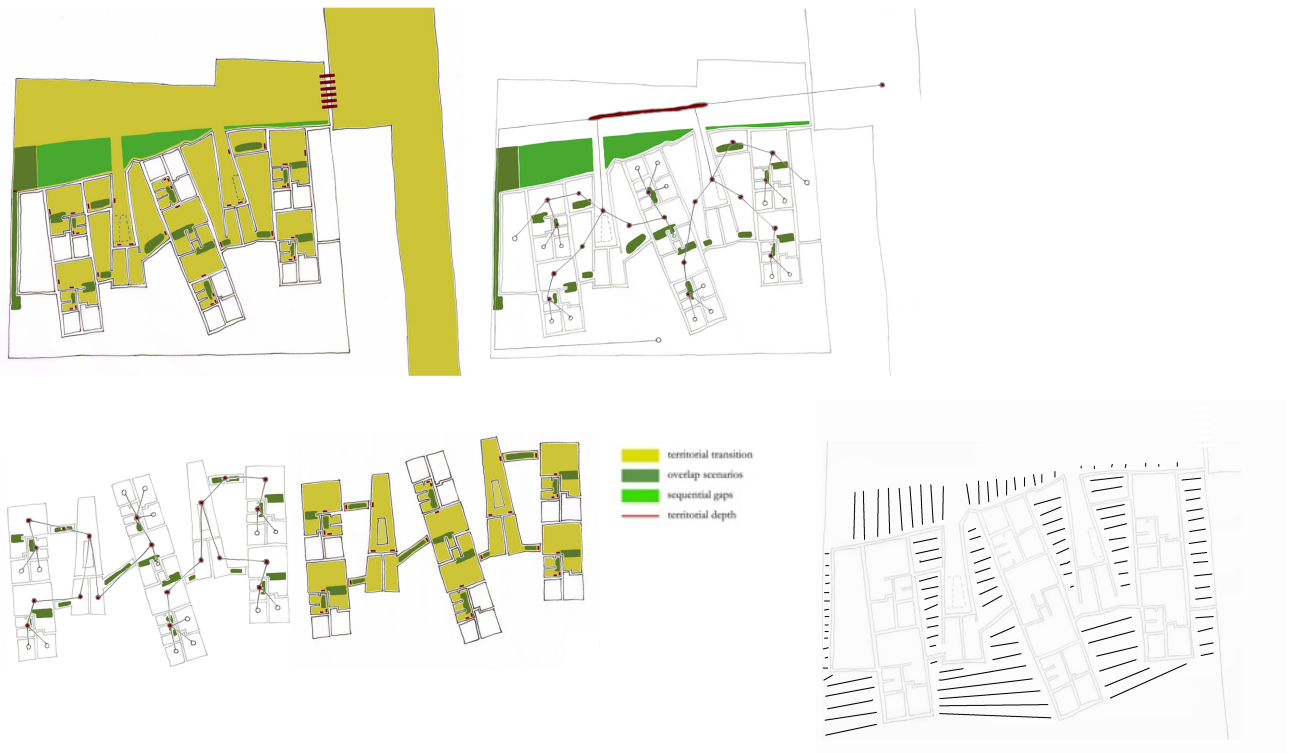


Figure 3: Streetscape Territories: Louviers case study: situation, plans and sections, scheme of territorial transition on different levels, scheme of “relative distances” within project.

Dealing implicitly with in-between spaces at a bigger scale, Bruno De Meulder described in *“Old Dispersions and Scenes for the Production of Public Space: the Constructive margins of Secundarity”* the underlying logic of an “unbroken urbanscape” in Belgium: an isotropic universal accessibility model defined one of the densest area in Europe, an area based on home ownership. *“Conventional wisdom condemns (the) ‘secundarity’ as a burden, as it does not allow economies of scale, and nor does it generate the synergies that concentration and accumulation allow. Because it remains dispersed, incremental and unconsolidated, it does not create any significant public space, nor an established (hegemonic) order. (...) The absence of rules and norms, generates an ambiguous space. It creates an open city, an embryonic territorial constellation that always remains receptive. Its continuously reproduced undefinedness renders permanent its character of wasteland, a terrain whose potentiality is not consumed”*¹²

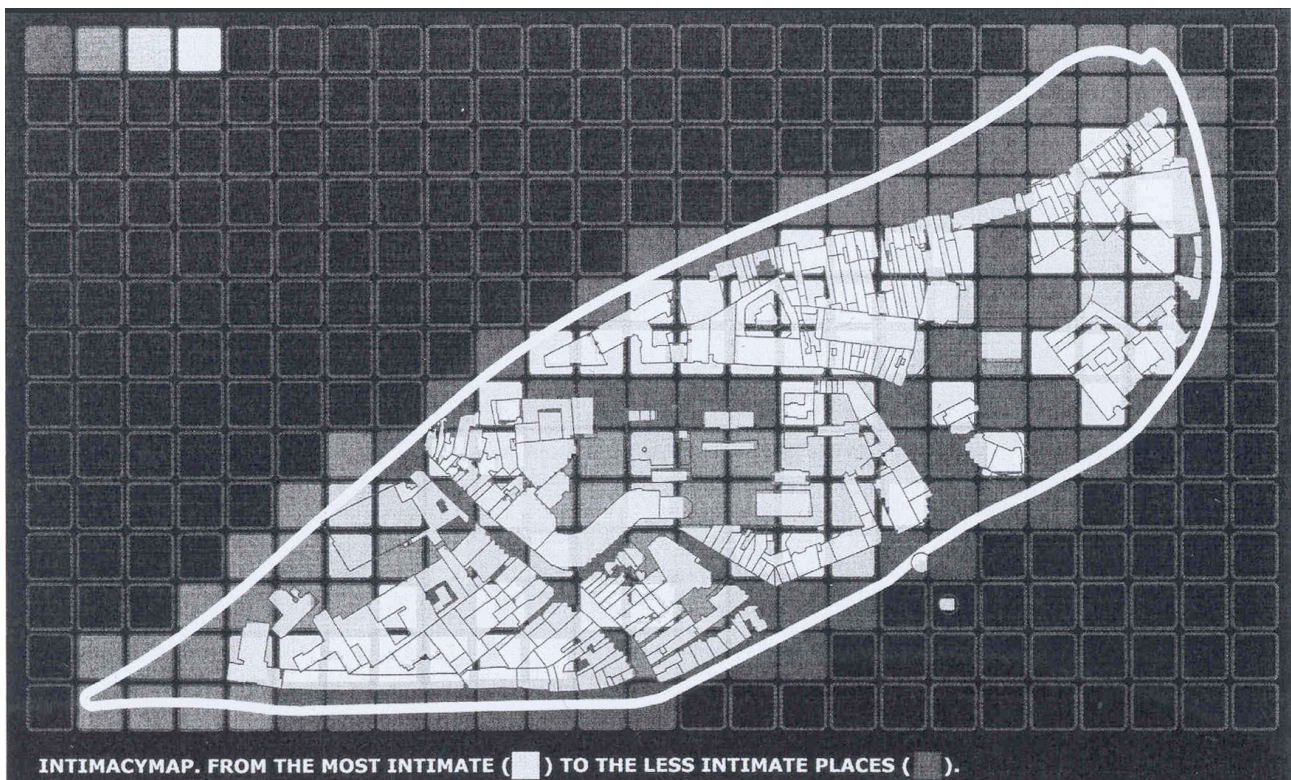


Figure 4: Intimacymap: OSA, Atlas Southwest Flanders, 2004: Buda intimacy/exposure-public-private (originally published in B., De Meulder, "Old Dispersions and scenes for the Production of Public Space" in Architectural Design, Cities of Dispersal (edited by Els Verbakel/Raf Segal), 2008, p 29)

The author proposed re-editing and re-inserting informal social spaces in areas of wasted land, like sequential gaps, trying to redefine residual spaces and to consider urban voids as acceptable and structural elements of territorial organisation. The used notion of "*secondarity*" in the study refers to a traditional hierarchical set up of territories while the *modus operandi* seems to be responding to different characteristics of the urban environment. The presented study looks for the new relationships between open public or collective spaces and more dense areas at a regional scale. De Meulder concluded that urban fabric, a result of rather *ad hoc* and unconsidered infill, construction, demolition and reconstruction, leads to a large variety of open spaces or sequential gaps with very different relationships to the private constructions. Apparently, he mentioned, this unordered, chaotic juxtaposition of open spaces -part of sets of relative distances, could be argued- offers on the one hand "*all conceivable gradients between public and private space, and on the other hand opens up a register of spaces ranging from extremely exposed to intimate*"¹³. The author continued by stating that re-editing would allow the articulation and exploitation of this richness of open-space qualities as what is conventionally only seen as residual space. In other words, this statement means a full acknowledgement of voids, in-between-spaces and sequential gaps as structural and not residual parts of urban configurations but above all, confirms the idea that there is a need to empower the informal, implicit and not-pre-defined use of space, as a counterweight to the growing explicitness of how the built environment is organised and used.

Implicit distances

In-between spaces, sequential gaps, voids or intermediate spaces should not be considered abstract spaces, even if they belong to a more abstract broader system of relative distances. In-between spaces are not empty, should not necessarily be considered as in-between *terrain vagues*¹⁴ or undefined spaces: the separation or integration they embody has a highly practical and immediate consequence for its users. The value and meaning of in-between spaces depend on the position they have in a broader setting, the one of a depth configuration, and the way we delimit those spaces. In-between spaces could become hollow containers if they exclusively depend on their explicit definition, a tactic that seems to have become a common way of dealing with urban space. However, if we approach in-between spaces as spaces that are able to contain implicitly defined collective levels or activity, they will become

structural parts of the mentioned depth configurations. There is an urgent need to allow the occasional use of implicit boundaries, defining implicit distances in a contemporary urban context that would be based on trust, more than on fear.

1 F. Strauven, "Aldo Van Eyck: Shaping the New Reality from the In-between to the Aesthetics of Number", Study Centre, Mellon Lectures, CCA, 2007

2 M. Bobic, "Between the Edges", Toth Publishers Bussum, 2004

3 G. Matta-Clark, "Splitting the Humphrey Street Building", interview by Liza Bear, May, 1974, published in Catalogue of Gordon Matta-Clark Exhibition, Museo Nacional, Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, 2006

4 P. G. Rowe, "Making The Middle Landscape", MIT press, Cambridge, 1991, p249

5 Streetscape Territories is an international research project that deals with the way buildings are related to streets. The project focuses on the territorial organization of urban projects, explored in different contexts, studied as part of different cultures and defined by different social networks. Streetscape Territories deals with models of proximity within a street, neighborhood or region and starts from the assumption that urban space, from the domestic scale till the scale of the city, can be understood as a discontinuous collective space, containing different levels of collective use that are defined by multiple physical, cultural or territorial boundaries. See www.streetscapeterritories.wordpress.com

6 M. de Solà-Morales, "Territoris Sense Model" article in Papers, Regió Metropolitana de Barcelona, n° 26, Barcelona, 1997, p 21-27

7 M. de Solà-Morales, "Territoris Sense Model" article in Papers, Regió Metropolitana de Barcelona, n° 26, Barcelona, 1997, p 21-27

8 B. Secchi, "For a Town-Planning of Open Spaces," in Casabella 597-598, January/February 1993, p 116

9 P. G. Rowe, "Making The Middle Landscape", MIT press, Cambridge, 1991, p249

10 High integration value within a depth configuration refers to the very position a space has in a depth configuration. If we count the number of spaces we must pass through to go from the space with a higher integration value to all other spaces, we find that it comes to a total which is less than for any other space, that is, it has less depth than any other space in the complex. The general form of this measure is called integration, and can be applied to any space in any configuration: the less depth from the complex as a whole, the more integrating the space, and vice versa. This means that every space in the different examples can be assigned an "integration value".

11 see also F. Strauven: "Aldo Van Eyck: Shaping the New Reality from the In-between to the Aesthetics of Number", Study Centre, Mellon Lectures, CCA, 2007

12 B. De Meulder, "Old Dispersions and scenes for the Production of Public Space" in Architectural Design, Cities of Dispersal (edited by Els Verbakel/Raf Segal), 2008, p 29

13 B. De Meulder, "Old Dispersions and scenes for the Production of Public Space" in Architectural Design, Cities of Dispersal (edited by Els Verbakel/Raf Segal), 2008, p 30

14 I. De Sola Morales, "Terrain Vague" In: Davidson, C. (ed), Anyplace, Anycooperation, New York, 1995, pp. 118-123.